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The Calligraphers

They Are Elegant, Quiet, and Steady of Hand

Since 1881, there have been nineteen chief executives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue—and six chief calligraphers. The staying power of the men who produce the White House's elegant hand-lettering owes much to the exotic nature of their skill. Bess Abell, social secretary for the Johnson White House, remembers a conversation she had with Lucy Winchester, the Nixon social secretary, as the Nixons were moving into the White House. "I was talking to her about White House staffers who stay from administration to administration," says Abell, "and she said, 'Well, I don't know if we'll be keeping on any of those people.'" Abell advised her not to make any announcements until she'd really thought about trying to find a political appointee accomplished at calligraphy.

Sanford Fox was the chief calligrapher at the time, and he survived that transition—and many others. Now in his sixties, with distinguished white hair and a white goatee, Fox first found his calligraphic skills in presidential demand when, in 1943, he was flying as a naval purser on the plane taking Franklin Roosevelt to the Tehran conference. When it became known that Fox could do hand-lettering, he was pressed into service to pen the place cards for a stopover dinner in Cairo, where the guests included Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Madame and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek.

When Fox left the Navy, he went to the CIA, which assigned him to the White House from time to time. At the end of the Eisenhower administration, he was hired permanently by the Office of Social Entertainments—in charge of calligraphy—and shortly thereafter he became head of it.

When he needed help, he turned to the CIA. There he found Russell Armentrout, a tall, thin, congenial fellow, who succeeded Fox as chief of Social Entertainments.

Russell Armentrout adds finishing touches to a dinner-program cover.

tainments in 1974, and Bill Gemmell, a handsome, dark-haired man who is head calligrapher today. Bess Abell remembers a time when the CIA tried persistently to get Gemmell back, but she managed to save him for her own and future social offices by calling CIA director Admiral William Raborn and asking, "Couldn't you please get someone else to forge passports?"

The number of White House calligraphers fluctuates from one administration to another. The Reagan White House is about average, with three men and a woman who hand-letter everything from Medal of Freedom citations to inscriptions on presidential photographs. To understand their workload, consider the demands of a single state dinner:

■ Working with magnifying glasses and chisel-pointed pens, the calligraphers insert on each invitation the name of the person or couple invited: the lettering they use matches the engraving. In old-fashioned Spencerian handwriting, they address each envelope.

■ Using a fifteenth-century Italian style, they write guests' names on escort envelopes, which contain table numbers. They do place cards in a copperplate script, a style that requires a special oblique penholder fitted with a sharp nib. Using an italic cursive hand, they letter the dinner menu, which is then reduced and printed on white, gold-beveled cards embossed with the presidential seal. The calligraphers also design the programs for the after-dinner entertainment.

■ On the night of the dinner, one of the calligraphers stays until all the guests are seated. By way of explanation, Maria Downs, social secretary during the Ford years, remembers a bad moment before a state dinner when an aide came rushing up to ask whether Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton had been invited. "I told him no," Downs says, "but he told me that Secretary Morton had arrived nonetheless, so we had to scramble around, rearrange the seating—and do

new place cards, of course."

It's not only White House functions that require elegant hand-lettering. "I think we probably do more calligraphy in Washington than anyplace else in the country," says Muffie Brandon, formerly social secretary to Mrs. Reagan. "There's a residue of diplomatic and official entertaining here that requires it." Says Gretchen Poston, social secretary during the Carter years: "People are becoming more and more aware of it. The corporate world likes it, too, as a special touch."

Calligraphy is also becoming recognized in Washington as high art, largely thanks to Sheila Waters, an Englishwoman who moved here in 1971. A member of the exclusive, London-based Society of Scribes and Illuminators, Waters has helped Washington appreciate the composition and design possibilities of hand-lettering. Another of her contributions has been in the person of her son Julian, 28, who is said by many to be the top calligraphic designer in Washington.

At the other end of the spectrum, calligraphy has come to be viewed in the past decade as a popular craft, a kind of macramé of the pen. Learn-it-yourself books and courses abound, which means there are plenty of people who can be hired to do all the place cards Washington entertaining demands.

Experts will tell you, however, that a few classes don't make a calligrapher. Russell Armentrout, in great demand as a commercial calligrapher since he left the White House in 1979, has never had any formal training. But he did serve a long apprenticeship under Sandy Fox, putting in many years of practice to make the hand unfailingly confident and the letters beautifully consistent.

"About once a week I get a call from a young person who wants to know if I need any help," says Armentrout, "but it usually turns out that they're no more calligraphers than people who've been to one piano lesson are pianists."

—LYNNE CHENEY